

Personnel Management

A necessary process for Conservation District directors is becoming aware of their responsibilities as employers. They are responsible for a host of things such as position descriptions, salaries, morale and longevity of an employee's position. Employees should not be treated as "hired hands". Conservation Districts must be responsible and fulfill their obligations to their employees. Their decisions affect large segments of the population and extend well beyond the boundaries of individual farms.

The Michigan Department of Agriculture (MDA) will provide samples of the following:

1. Recruitment procedures
2. Individual development plans
3. Evaluation forms
4. Position descriptions
5. Work agreements (conditions of employment)
6. Recommended code of ethics and conduct
7. Written office policies and procedures
8. Written personnel policies

Employee Supervision

Supervision is the process of directing and inspecting the performance of employees. Good supervision consists of the following as a minimum:

1. Clear direction as to what is expected of the employee in regard to all aspects of the job, including personal conduct, interaction with the public and fellow workers, quantity and quality of work.
2. Regular feedback on performance, indicating good work and also where improvement is needed.
3. Demonstration of personal concern, fairness and respect for the employee.

While an employee is ultimately hired by the Conservation District(s) the employees often must work under the guidelines of a different agency or funding source (i.e. MDEQ, MDNR, grants, etc.). It may not be obvious to the new employee just who is supervising their work. It is important that a supervisor is agreed upon among all interested parties before the employee is hired. This supervisor may or may not be someone in the Conservation District.

Regardless, Conservation District boards should continue to set direction, establish policies and priorities and serve as a source of appeal for the District employee.

Employee Recruitment

Recruitment is the process of locating and hiring employees. It is probably the most important part of building a good Conservation District program. Employees with the right qualifications can usually be molded into high quality employees. Recruitment is a complex process. Interviews should not be used as the only source of selection and should only be used to narrow down the final selection list. Some combination of the following selection methods are most commonly used:

1. References and recommendations.
2. Application blanks /résumé.
3. Interviews.

Cooperating agencies can be helpful in assisting the Conservation District in selecting District employees. The new employee will be expected to work with and be accepted by the local cooperating agencies.

Because of state and national laws it is important that correct selection procedures be followed. Review the Pre-Employment Inquiry Guide in the Appendix and the "Interview" section in the Conservation District Operations Handbook for guidance. It is also important that Conservation District directors:

1. Develop a job description, work agreement and individual development plan for new employees.
2. Initiate and participate in the employee selection process.
3. Provide a realistic job preview to an applicant for the Conservation District employee position before the job offer has been accepted. A realistic job preview should include the disadvantages as well as the advantages of the position.

(See Conservation District Operations Handbook for sample vacancy announcement)

Employee Training

It is a misconception that newly hired employees should be able to come on board and immediately begin to provide high quality, efficient service to the public. Conservation District employees can be expected to be skilled in technical and people skills and work with very little supervision. It is, however, unrealistic to expect new employees to be completely productive and effective under new and unfamiliar conditions. Some time must be allowed to let the employee become acquainted with the operations of the District and the program they are serving. As such, personal development opportunities are imperative.

Conservation District employees do participate in general training sessions to varying degrees. But there is also an evident need to send Conservation District employees to training sessions that meet the needs of their individual development plans and enhance knowledge in their area of expertise.

All employees, with the assistance of the NRCS Conservationist, appropriate partners and the approval of the Conservation District board need to develop or update a training plan at the beginning of each fiscal year. Training for Conservation District employees should come from a variety of public and private sources in order for Conservation District employees to develop a broad perspective.

Employee Evaluations

Evaluation is the process by which an employer critiques, grades and scores an employee's performance. A system of evaluation of the Conservation District employees should be established within the District and the Conservation District employee should be evaluated at least yearly. New employees need to be evaluated more frequently and at least every ninety days during their probationary period.

Evaluation may take several forms. There is the informal evaluation. This process takes place daily or whenever the employer has contact with the employee. It may even be subconscious. The individual employee's appearance, mannerisms and attitudes are evaluated and make up the basis for the employer's general feelings towards the employee.

This informal evaluation often includes criteria not agreed upon or included in the formal performance appraisal and it often includes personal characteristics and values, which should not be evaluated. These personal characteristics often make up the style or individuality of the employee that an employer should not attempt to change.

Many times the informal evaluation has a great impact on the employer and employee. If the employee makes a bad impression with the employer, it is often impossible for that employee, no matter how good their actual work performance, to meet the expectations of the employer. Conversely, if an employee makes a favorable personal impression, substandard performance may be overlooked.

This informal evaluation process is a "two-way street". The employees also evaluate the employers. The employees are asking themselves - "How am I treated?" "Is my opinion respected?" "Am I getting paid what I feel my time is worth?" "Does my employer understand my needs?" If the employees are unsatisfied with the answers to these questions and others, they could be unsatisfied with their job and their work output may reflect this dissatisfaction.

The formal evaluation process helps to objectively quantify and qualify many of the informal evaluations that take place. It also helps to clarify those characteristics the employer has a right to question. The formal evaluation lessens the impact of the informal evaluation and it also encourages the employer and employee to identify and discuss strengths and areas needing improvement. The goal of the formal evaluation process is to set up open communication between the employer and employee that allows employees to know how their work is perceived and how they are performing based on predetermined criteria. It encourages growth of the employee and a better understanding of employer's responsibilities to their employees.

Employee Position Descriptions

Position descriptions are important to outline the duties and responsibilities of the Conservation District employee and set the basic framework for his/her operations. They also provide for a smooth transition from one employee to another.

Conservation District employees are encouraged to keep position descriptions updated and current to the point where they accurately reflect their duties and responsibilities. District Directors should review position descriptions with their employees at least annually.

Employee Work Agreement

The work agreement contract between an employer and employee is important in establishing the hours, wages, benefits and other conditions of employment of the employee and to define the obligations of the employer. The work agreement should describe work rules and other standards to

which the employee should adhere. *Only by non-compliance with items in the work agreement may an employee be terminated.*

The work agreement should be reviewed and updated at least annually, although every six months would be more appropriate. This review and updating should be written into the agreement. *The employee should not be responsible for ensuring the review and updating of their own work agreement.* An employee should not be asked to continue working without an up-to-date work agreement. Amendments to the work agreement may be added during the course of the contract year to allow for changes in conditions of employment.

(See the Conservation District Operations Handbook for a sample of a work agreement)

District Employment Guidelines

It is required that each Conservation District adopt staff employment policies with the following guidelines:

I. Written Work Agreement

Developed between the district and the employee, it is essential to eliminate confusion about conditions of employment and duties. The agreement should include, but not be limited to, the following:

- A. A statement affirming the District policy of non-discrimination by race, creed, color, religion, age, or sex in appointments, promotions, compensation or other actions affecting employees of the District. An example follows:

The _____ Conservation District, an Equal Opportunity Employer, complies with applicable federal and state laws prohibiting discrimination. It is the policy of the _____ Conservation District that no person, on the basis of race, sex, color, religion, national origin or ancestry, age, marital status, handicap, or Vietnam-era veteran status, shall be discriminated against in employment or promotions.

- B. A list of duties which the employee is expected to perform. (See Administrator's/Executive Director's Duties).
- C. Salary rate and schedule and fringe benefits. Note: Conservation Districts are subject to minimum wage laws. The District board should check with the county administrator for the county salary schedule and a job description close to the District employee duties. This information may be used as a guideline for determining wages, etc.
- D. Working hours and breaks.
- E. The agreement should provide for a review by the District board, or Administrator/Executive Director. This evaluation should be made annually with the employee. New employees should be reviewed at shorter intervals, typically 3 and 6 months.

II. District Employment Guidelines

- A. Duties of employees should be listed with priorities [District activity, cooperating agency(ies)].

- B. Wages should be paid on a regular schedule, at least biweekly.
- C. Salary should be commensurate with experience, degree or responsibility and comparable with rates paid by other units of government for similar duties.
- D. Hours of full-time employees should coincide with regular District office hours. Regular part-time employees should be scheduled for work on a regular basis. (e.g. Monday, Tuesday, and Friday afternoons/mornings).

III. Fringe Benefits

A. Full-time employees:

- 1. Shall receive overtime pay of at least 1-1/2 times the standard pay rate for work in excess of 40 hours per week.
- 2. Should receive reimbursement for mileage for personal car used on District business.
- 3. Should receive paid vacation time based on length of employment.
- 4. Should receive accumulative sick leave to a desired maximum.
- 5. Should receive health insurance assistance.
- 6. Should receive paid holidays that coincide with those of the NRCS office and/or county government.
- 7. Retirement
 - a. Shall receive Social Security coverage for those contributing Districts.
 - b. Should receive consideration for a retirement program.

B. Regularly employed part-time employees:

- 1. Shall receive Social Security coverage for contributing Districts. Districts not enrolled may wish to consider doing so as a benefit to the employee.
- 2. Should receive mileage reimbursement.
- 3. Should receive vacation and sick leave proportionate to full time (40 hours a week).

IV. Legal Requirements

By law, a District must provide all employees with Worker's Compensation, unemployment compensation insurance, and a surety bond if the employee is entrusted with District funds and/or equipment. Provisions must be made for deductions of state and federal income taxes.

V. Staff Board Liaison

A member of the District board shall be designated by the chairman as the contact (liaison) person for the employee and immediate supervisor. In addition, the liaison person is to keep

the District board apprised of the employee's progress or effectiveness as well as any employment situation problems.

VI. Training

The District should encourage participation of employees in training programs provided by MDA and other agencies. Attendance of District staff at MDA, NRCS, state and regional MACD meetings, demonstrations and informational meetings are beneficial in upgrading knowledge and skills needed to efficiently complete duties and responsibilities.

District Personnel Policies

Whether to serve as information for a potential employee, or for taking a stand on a resource issue, it is essential that the District board formulate policies before they are needed. Remember, directors are the visionaries and must have foresight in determining what is best for the District and its employees. Too often a conflict or crisis is the impetus for setting policy. A personnel policy should provide both information on the District's current employment policies and provide insight to the benefits and responsibilities of being an employee. A personnel policy is not a contract. To be useful it should be reviewed on a regular basis and revised or modified as necessary.

In general, there are two types of personnel policies: Just Cause and At Will. While everything else may remain the same, the essential difference is that an "At Will" policy permits either party, employer or employee, to end the employment relationship at either's discretion without cause. A "Just Cause" policy, as its name indicates, provides that the employer must have good reason for the termination of an employment relationship and provides a procedure for progressive discipline of an employee.

Appendix B and the Conservation District Operations Handbook contain examples of both types of policies. Most Districts operate under a Just Cause Policy. Whatever policy the board decides upon, it is imperative that all members have an understanding of its content and purpose.

Part 93 of Act 451 of 1994 Section 9307 states: "The directors may employ a secretary, technical experts and such other officers, agents, and employees, permanent and temporary, as they may require, and shall determine their qualifications, duties and compensation."

Administrator/Executive Director's Duties

The Administrator/Executive Director is first an employee of the board, but the relationship between the board and the Administrator/Executive Director is not a typical employee/ employer relationship. In business the employer is the expert on the nature of the business and probably knows more about the business than the employee. The reverse is true of the Administrator/Executive Director. The role of the Administrator/Executive Director can be defined as keeping the board informed and doing the board members' job for them - a way for the board to fill its mandate.

It is each Conservation District's responsibility to match the administrative duties to the needs of the District as they deem necessary. In doing this, each District's duties assigned to the Administrator/ Executive Director are different.

Generally, the Administrator's/Executive Director's duties include and are not limited to the following:

1. Coordinate and assist in planning District events.

2. Arrange for and attend Conservation District board meetings, annual meetings and other District functions. Prepare and distribute newsletters and other information and education activities. Maintain files on all District activities.
3. Prepare material relating to the District board agenda, meeting and minutes. Prepare correspondence.
4. Serve as receptionist for the District; answer the phone, greet visitors, handle requests and schedule appointments.
5. Maintain District bookkeeping system and District files, correspondence, handbooks, manuals and memoranda, assist with audit reports.
6. Perform other related duties as assigned by the Conservation District board.
7. At the direction of the board, assume management of a District project.
8. Assist in preparing and updating annual and long-range plans, assist with conservation education programs.
9. Provide typing, filing, and other administrative support to the technical staff carrying out the District's soil and water conservation programs.